



Filling a Need or Seeing an Opportunity? The Evolution of Grant Writing and Research Instruction in the Libraries at the University of Utah

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Abstract

An investment in continuing education in the area of grantsmanship for a public services librarian has resulted in the teaching of Grant Writing & Research offered at the J. Willard Marriott Library and the Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library on the campus of the University of Utah. This has led to an unexpected method of library outreach to the university faculty and to the community at large, promoting the overall collections and services of the libraries on campus.

In the field of academic medicine and other areas of the health sciences, grant writing is a skill that is often expected to be self taught or acquired informally by trial and error. Nevertheless it is a critical skill for those graduate students, post-doctoral students, academic fellows, or new tenure-track faculty members who realize that obtaining external funding is one of the key variables, along with publishing and the ability to create and define a research project, that are the key elements to a successful career in medical research.¹ In fact, writing can have an economic impact on one's career in academic medicine and the health sciences; successful grantsmanship leads to research, research leads to an increase in publications, which in turn leads to an increase in earnings.²

In some cases, an academic department or college may be fortunate enough to have a full-time grant writer on staff who might be available to provide instruction or guidance, but the primary responsibility of these individuals is generally to help senior faculty and administrators write and obtain grants. The grant writer, therefore, often has neither the time nor the willingness to teach these skills to others. When a new fellow in Cardiology was asked about any type of formal education in area of grant writing, his response was, "We need to learn on our own." When asked the same question, a new assistant professor of Internal Medicine replied, "It's just something you're expected to pick up if you want to stay around here." Interestingly, a review of the medical education literature suggests that surveys of new physicians in fellowship programs show grant writing to be one area in administrative skills in which new physicians have asked for increased training.³ Success in academic publishing also is tied into formalized training in grant writing: A 2005 study stated that 54% of published first-time authors in the area of academic medicine had received formalized instruction in grant writing.⁴



Grant writing in Medicine and the Health Sciences also remains an extremely competitive venture. For example, some 60,000 applications are received by the National Institutes of Health, and only a third are funded.⁵ Furthermore, in a trend that many in the sciences find disturbing, in 1994 it was reported that NIH grants awarded to young investigators (those under the age of 37) decreased by 50% during the preceding eight years.⁶ In 2001, NIH awarded 6,635 “competing grants”; of these, only 251 went to researchers under the age of 35.⁷ Although there are various arguments as to why this is, the fact remains that for young, tenure-track faculty, these numbers make the grant process even more daunting.

As resources in all areas of academia become more finite, the expectations of faculty and professional staff in the Health Sciences and other areas to get support for various projects from outside entities such as private foundations or government agencies increases. The information needs of individuals requiring this type of information naturally causes an increased demand of knowledge and services on the reference desk but also new demands in the area of instruction for grant writing and grant research.

In the fall of 2001, librarians at the J. Willard Marriott Library and Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library at the University of Utah were working together to share and expand their expertise and to expand the mission of each library’s respective instruction program through a series of “sharing classes.” In these classes, librarians from the Eccles Health Sciences Library would teach at the Marriott Library and vice versa. One of the proposed instruction areas where a strong need was anticipated was in the area of grant writing and research for those in Medicine and the Health Sciences.

One of the concerns that was discussed among librarians at both libraries was the training and background of the librarian who would be teaching these courses. An informal survey of the public service librarians at both libraries showed that there had been no formal education in this area for anyone at either library. It was discovered, however, that there were numerous training opportunities to learn how to teach the basics of grant writing to varied audiences. The workshops at the Foundation Center were highly recommended and reasonably priced. Initial support for continuing education in this area was provided by the Assistant Director for Public Services at the Marriott Library for a librarian to attend continuing education courses at the Foundation Center branch library in Cleveland, Ohio.

In the spring of 2002, the first courses in Grants Research were offered at the Eccles Health Sciences Library; two one-hour sections were offered at the beginning of the



semester. Times were chosen not to conflict with other library instruction offerings at Eccles Health Sciences Library. The average attendance for these new offerings was 6 students per class, but the feedback from the attendees at the classes was overwhelmingly positive.

With the initial success of these new course offerings, patrons who took these courses at Eccles Health Sciences Library began requesting instruction in the area of grants research as well as grant writing. At the same time, the new Head of the Technology Assistance Curriculum Center (TACC) was very enthusiastic about offering an introductory course in the area of grant writing and grant research as part of the services offered by TACC. TACC is housed in the Marriott Library and its purpose is to help University of Utah faculty members integrate technology into their teaching. One of the ways TACC meets the needs of faculty is by offering a series of short courses each semester in numerous areas of applied technology for improving teaching; "Grant Writing and Research" is now among the short courses offered to faculty. Additional funding was provided by TACC for continuing education for the same librarian in the area of grant writing through the Foundation Center.

After additional grant writing and research training for the instructor librarian in the summer of 2002, courses were expanded the following fall semester. Among the items included in the curriculum for the new two-hour short course were an overview and introduction to grant and proposal writing, a summary of the roles of the Office of Development and the Office of Sponsored Research at the University of Utah, and bibliographic instruction in and a description of the content of databases used in grants research. Informal observations about the students taking these courses by the instructor indicate that those individuals with clinical backgrounds seem to be most interested in learning about the grant databases and bibliographic instruction in the areas of using the these databases. Graduate students and individuals from non-clinical backgrounds seem to be most interested in the introduction of how to begin to write a grant and the thought process that goes into writing one.

Currently, two sections with an average attendance of 11 students are offered each semester at the Eccles Health Sciences Library. (The maximum enrollment per class is 14 to ensure individualized instruction.) The courses are specifically tailored for the needs of those in the Health Sciences. The positions of individuals taking the classes via the Eccles Health Sciences Library included departmental coordinators, study coordinators, medical editors, new tenure-track faculty in the health sciences, and doctoral candidates from various departments in the College of Science, College of Health, the College of Nursing, the School of Medicine, and the Huntsman Cancer Institute.



Faculty in the departments of Foods and Nutrition and Biochemistry now regularly refer their graduate students to the short courses offered at the Eccles Health Science Library. The Department of Political Science and Public Administration has a librarian teach a section on grants research as an integrated library instruction component as part of a graduate course in non-profit management. Interestingly, doctoral candidates from several departments within the College of Science and the College of Social Sciences have stated that they were expected to write mock grant proposal for their research as part of their comprehensive exams for the doctoral degree but that there was little or no formal instruction in the area of grant writing in their graduate program. The instruction received via these short courses in grant writing and research was the only formal instruction that they received. In addition, customized presentations have been made to several academic departments on campus to reflect grant opportunities in their disciplines.

Similar courses are also offered by this librarian instructor in other areas of the university (e.g., the Humanities, the Social Sciences) via the TACC; these courses tend to have lower faculty enrollment, on average about 4 participants. It is puzzling that individuals in the other departments on campus that are always seeking outside funding (the arts, the humanities) have not taken greater advantage of this instruction. It is hoped that by expanding the notification of the courses to these departments will have the benefit of increasing the audience. In the area of undergraduate instruction, grant instruction as been included as a section for undergraduate fine arts students in the university's LEAP program concentrating on community grants for the arts. LEAP stands for Learning Engagement Achievement Progress and is defined by the university as *"a year-long learning community for entering University students. It consists of two three-credit-hour courses -- one fall semester, one spring semester -- taken with the same professor and classmates, allowing students to build community. LEAP's two classes fulfill the diversity requirement and two general education requirements and are linked to optional classes in writing, library research, major selection, and service."* This is seen as an excellent audience for introduction to the services offered by the library in terms of instruction, and resources, and it furthers the skills the students may use and value in the future.

Individuals affiliated with several pharmaceutical and biotechnology firms that have ties to the University of Utah have also attended this course. In an unexpected outcome, professionals in the non-profit arena from the community have discovered these courses, although there was no outside advertising to promote these classes. Among those who have attended are social workers, public health professionals, and development officers from such organizations as the Department of Health of the State of Utah, U.S. Public Health Service, the United Way, the ARC of Utah, Catholic Social Services, and the LDS Church Foundation. When individuals from



outside the university were asked how they learned about these classes, the answer was always the same. The classes were located via the Eccles Health Sciences Library web pages in a Google search for grant writing classes at the University of Utah.

Lastly, presentations on grant writing and research have also been given to several professional organizations including the Utah State Library Association, the New Mexico Library Association, the Mountain Plains Library Association, the Utah Museums Association, and the Western Association of Social Scientists. These sessions have always been very well attended at professional conferences.

A modest investment in grants education for a public services librarian has resulted in a value-added service offered at two libraries on the campus of the University of Utah. This has led to an unexpected method of outreach and an increase in instruction statistics for both libraries by offering additional classes and promoting the overall collections and services of the libraries on campus.

Notes:

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3. Medina-Walpole, A., W. Barker, et al. 2004. Strengthening the Fellowship Training Experience: Findings from a National Survey of Fellowship trained Geriatricians 1990-1998. *Journal of American Geriatrics Society* 52: 607-610
4. Reed, D.A., D.E. Kern, et al. 2005. Costs and Funding for Published Medical Education. *JAMA* 294 (9) : 1052 – 1057
5. Coelho, A.M. 2006. Peer Review of NIH Research Grant Applications. http://www.ncrr.nih.gov/resinfra/AC1_IDeASymposium_07-21-06.pdf (accessed April 9, 2007)
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7. Goldman E. and E. Marshal. 2002. NIH Grantees: Where Have All the Young Ones Gone? *Science* 298 : 41-41